STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 59 | Number 4 (Fall 2000) pps. 425-426

Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature

ISSN 0003-4827

Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature, by Susan J. Rosowski. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. xiii, 242 pp. Bibliographical references, index. $50.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY ELLEN FANGMAN, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

Frustrated by the legacy of male dominance in western American literature, Susan Rosowski rallies for the cause of female creativity and literary skill. In her latest book, *Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature,* Rosowski argues that the popular Western has long been overshadowed by the "male logos" much to the detriment of the female voice. But, as she emphatically asserts, four female western American authors—Sarah Margaret Fuller, Willa Cather, Jean Stafford, and Marilynne Robinson—merit equal (if not greater) status among their male contemporaries, because they responded with unbiased elegance and unbridled creativity to the charge of "giving birth to a nation" (29).

Beginning with Fuller's work, *Summer on the Lakes* (1844), in which Fuller bids women to "create a new civilization in America" (27), and ending with the "politics of meditation" (177) in Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980), Rosowski argues that these four authors have subverted the male myths at the heart of the popular Western by employing the single most civilizing factor they were endowed with—language—to show how intimately they were connected to nature, particularly the West. A "male Muse" inseminates their body of literature, but the rich female metaphors of birth, gestation, and kinship act as catalysts in the progression of their plots and the evolution of their characters.

In *Summer on the Lakes,* Fuller "domesticates the frontier" (24) with female metaphors, and her conversational tone elucidates her newfound familiarity with a West formerly known only to men. She proves that women as well as men have a "natural place" (27) in the history of the West by her own accounts of self-discovery on the prairie. Furthermore, she argues in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* that women must gain independence from men but also act as the creators for the male Muse. That is, they must complement the male body of thought while energizing it with their own transcendental strengths.

Rosowski claims that Cather, who was born into a period where the male stereotype flourished in western literature, seeks less to complement the male myth than to shatter its dominance. In "Eric Hermannson's Soul," "The Bohemian Girl," and *O Pioneers!,* Cather "moved from male to female protagonist, from conventional man to natural woman, and from an untamed nature to be conquered to a wildness within to be freed" (67). The women of Cather's fiction, par-

ticularly Antonia in *My Antonia*, appropriate typically male qualities—such as exploration and discovery—and use them to tell powerful stories about their identification with nature and their return to self. Stafford follows in Cather's footsteps, but writes from a West "fictionalized as a cultural code" (94). She uncovers the violence and desire behind the fantasy of the formula Western and its "anxiety over articulation of masculinity" (143).

Rosowski extends her study of the subversion of masculinity in chapter 8. She implicitly opposes the male logos—a "struggle against words"—to the freedom of expression that characterizes the four female authors in question. Marilynnne Robinson, according to Rosowski, also incorporates the birth metaphor into her novels and values the epistemological aspect of language.

Rosowski is ambitious in her quest for thematic consistency in these authors' works. The idea of birthing a nation often seems artificially imposed upon and not born out of the novels, stories, and essays she analyzes, but her analysis is careful and well documented. Her approach is semi-historical, semi-text-based, and semi-philosophical, which makes for an intriguing if not overwhelming introduction to the world of female creativity in western American literature.

Uneven Land: Nature and Agriculture in American Writing, by Stephanie L. Sarver. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. xiv, 207 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. $40.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY FRIEDA KNOBLOCH, UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

For nearly thirty years, critics have combed through American literature for themes and ideas describing people's relationships with nature. Ecocriticism has come into its own as a literary subfield, often inspired by the search for a usable past with which to approach contemporary environmental problems. Agriculture has received sustained critical attention over the same period, representing another front of environmental inquiry primarily grounded in history. Some literary scholars have recently approached agricultural history and literature together, extending ecocriticism to include agriculture, and extending agricultural-historical questions to literature and letters more broadly. They help us understand the place of farming as a nexus of nature and culture in American thought and experience. Sarver's *Uneven Land* contributes to this emerging literary scholarship.

In five suggestive, brief chapters, Sarver explores the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, William Smythe,